

TSA fee hikes irk architects of budget deal

By Kevin Robillard

5/21/14 12:32 PM EDT

The TSA appears ready to implement a fee hike included in December's year-end budget deal in a way that could end up costing air passengers \$20 or more per trip, drawing fire from the deal's architects.

House Speaker John Boehner, Senate Budget Chairwoman Patty Murray (D-Wash.) and House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) have all expressed opposition to how the TSA plans to implement the security fee increase.

The agreement hiked the security fee that passengers pay per trip from \$2.50 to \$5.60, but the TSA is also proposing to eliminate a long-standing \$10 cap on round-trip fees. TSA is also planning to define trips that include "stopovers" — breaks in travel of more than four hours — as separate flights.

Taken together, the changes could result in passengers with particularly complicated itineraries paying \$20 or even \$30 worth of fees for a round-trip flight.

In a letter to TSA Administrator John Pistole last week, Murray and Ryan said it was "inaccurate to cite Congressional intent" as a reason to change the fee structure. They asked Pistole to "cite the specific statutory authority that permits this interpretation of the law."

Boehner elevated the dispute Tuesday, firing off a short letter to Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson echoing Murray and Ryan's concerns.

In a statement, Department of Homeland Security spokesman Peter Boogaard didn't directly address Ryan, Murray and Boehner's concerns.

"The rule is currently with OMB for review and will include a period for public comment once released," he said.

The Obama administration has long sought to increase the security fee to help pay for TSA operations, but Congress repeatedly rejected the proposal before the Ryan-Murray budget deal.

In an earlier letter to Pistole, Airlines for America head Nick Calio and Travelers United Chairman Charlie Leocha pledged to use "all resources at our disposal to ensure passengers are not being subject to unjust fees."

"TSA's proposed changes will result in passengers paying more than Congress intended and also require significant programmatic changes that will take at least 90 days to develop and test. This change will disproportionately hurt consumers from small and rural communities who must often use more one-way trips to reach their final destination," the pair wrote in March.

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